Student Exemplar

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Character Analysis: Creon

“Political leader” is a difficult position to assume. While they are often genuinely praised and respected, they are met with enormous responsibility and criticism. Every move they make must pass inspection of the public eye. Whether a new leader chooses the “loved” route or the “feared” route, what they need more than anything is the approval of their people. In Sophocles’ Greek tragedy “Antigone,” when Creon suddenly finds himself tossed into the world of politics, he makes his decree for a hidden reason. As much as he disapproved of Polynices’ actions, his real motive was to establish his reputation as a strict disciplinarian.

Creon begins his reign with the controversial decree and the punishment that will fall upon anyone who dares to disobey. He first claims that you cannot truly judge a man “in heart and mind” until they have had “experience in the exercise of power.” He believes that power is very important, and can either make you great or make you nothing. This statement shows how much Creon wanted to use his power to prove himself to the people of Thebes. He then goes on to discuss Polynices, saying that they must “leave his corpse unburied” and that any man who does will meet his death, as “that shall be his doom.” With these threatening words, Creon hopes to begin his reign with respect. His desire is to prove that his laws will be enforced.

When the news breaks that the law beaker was Antigone, of all people, Creon is met with a dilemma. This woman was almost a member of his family, but to excuse her from the law would set a precedence of lenience. He makes the decision to “kill the bride of [his] own son” because she “dared to overstep [the] laws.” Since Creon’s son Haemon was engaged to Antigone, he could have justified excusing her crime. But in order to set a good example, she must die. Antigone’s sentence is solitary confinement “in a rocky cavern” that is “completely devoid of human life.” There, she would be left to die. Her status with the royal family would not excuse her from the law.

Unfortunately, Antigone’s death does not bring Creon’s desired result. Teiresias delivers his message “bringing woe,” and announces Creon must “release the maiden from her cavern tomb.” However, Antigone is already dead and he realizes his mistake too late. At this peripeteia, things begin to go wrong for the king. His beloved son Haemon’s “own hand sheds his blood,” and the queen, Eurydice, stabs herself upon “hearing her son’s most pitiable fate.” His decision to enforce his rules ultimately causes the death of his loved ones. The story ends with a changed man.

Creon becomes the textbook dynamic character. He starts off as a stubborn leader who cares only about his rules, and ends as a sad, lonely man who has lost everything. He truly regrets his actions, much like many characters in Greek drama. Arguably, he was generally good man, whose only desire was successful law enforcement in his country. Yet he caused his own sad fate as so many Greek characters do. Creon was a man of both mistakes and misfortune.